

Tannenberg/26-30 August, 1914

In the early days of the First World War, Imperial German troops in East Prussia were outnumbered. While the greater part of Kaiser Wilhelm II's forces advanced through Belgium and France, his Eighth Army in the east, commanded by General Max von Prittwitz, was spread thinly across the northeastern province, which formed a vulnerable salient deep inside Russia.

Because of massive German pressure on the Western Front, the French made repeated and vociferous appeals to their ally, Tsar Nicholas II, to relieve them by opening a second front.

Though mobilization was incomplete, the Russians generously agreed to mount an offensive against East Prussia, using two armies from General Yakov Jilinsky's north-west army group, a total of about 450,000 men. Russia certainly had an abundance of manpower, but was woefully lacking in administrative ability; nor was there competent machinery to keep thousands of soldiers properly supplied in the field. A further hindrance, both to rapid troop movement and the commissariat, lay in the gauge of Russia's railway system, which was wider than that of Germany. As a defensive move to thwart invasion it was admirable, but it was equally inhibiting for offensive moves. Transport from Russian frontier railheads into East Prussia was obliged to rely on horse-drawn wagons, laboriously moving along inferior roads.

Knowing that his supply lines were in disarray, General Pavel Rennenkampf, the Russian commander in the area, nevertheless advanced on the Germans, on 17 August. His First Army was to form the right wing of a pincer movement by driving into East Prussia, through the corridor between the Baltic Sea and the north side of the huge Masurian lakes. The left arm of the pincer was formed by General Aleksandr Samsonov's Second Army, swinging around the southern end of the lakes. Unfortunately, Samsonov, who had feuded with Rennenkampf since the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, was ill prepared to invade when the First Army began its advance. It was typical of the lack of co-operation that blemished their short, disastrous campaign.

After a brush with German outposts at Stallupönen on the day Rennenkampf crossed the border, the Russians were next confronted by the left wing of Prittwitz's Eighth Army at Gumbinnen, on 20 August.

Prittwitz sought a decisive victory over the first Russian army to invade, which would then leave him free to deal with any other attack which might materialize later, doubtless aided by reinforcements transferred from the Western Front as the



When the First World War broke out, German military planning was based on the Schlieffen Plan, conceived by the Field Marshal of that name to meet the possibility of his country's having to fight on two fronts. It called for a knockout blow to France and a holding action against Russia, until such time as reinforcements could be transferred from the Western Front to deal with the threat from the east. The Russians, however, unexpectedly invaded East Prussia in large numbers, even before they were fully mobilized, thus throwing great strain on the German Eighth Army guarding the eastern frontier.

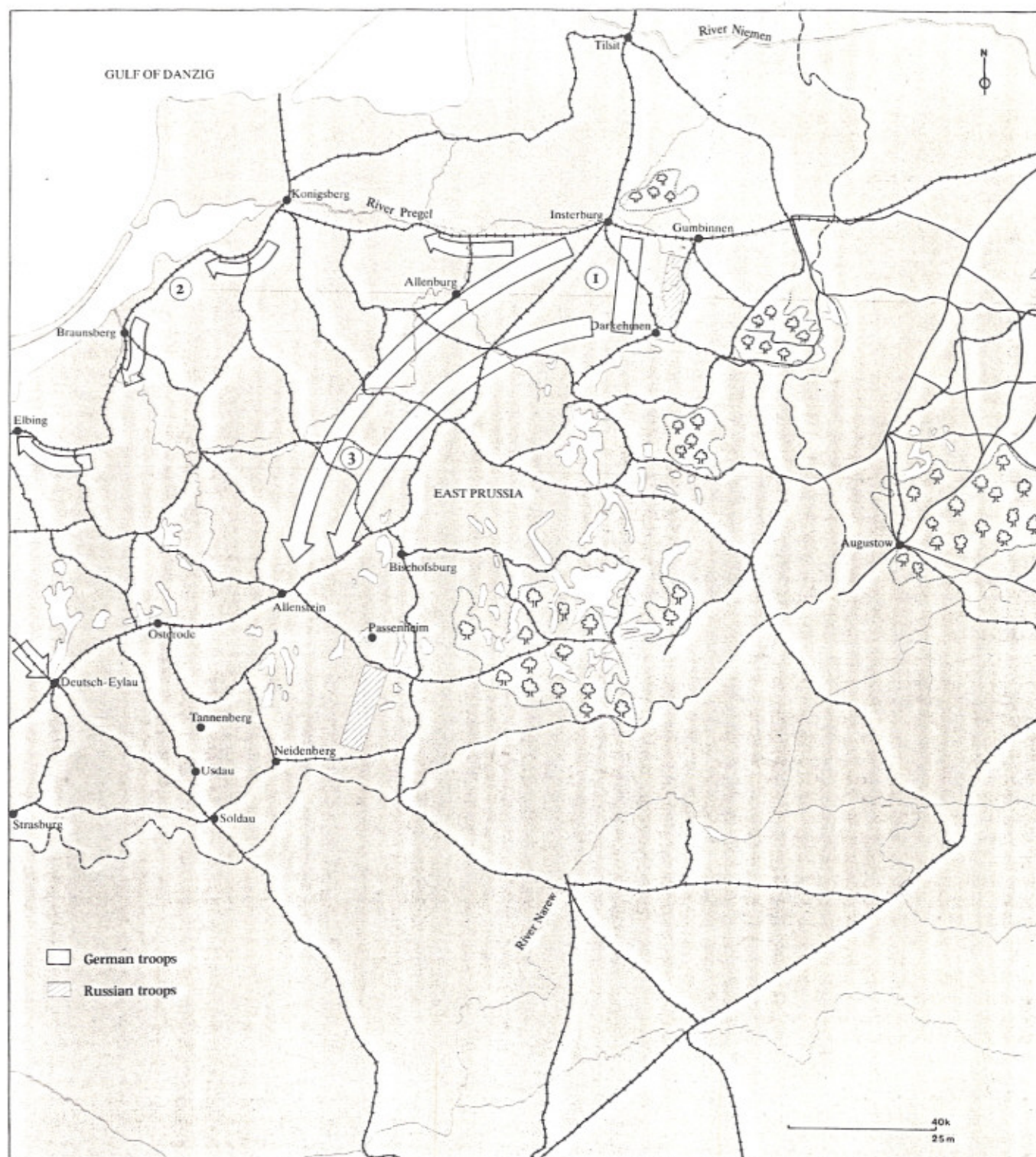


A German howitzer in action at Tannenberg.



A Russian field gun and its crew, photographed in firing position during the battle.

VF - Tannenberg



After two brushes with the Russian First Army in the north of East Prussia on 17 and 20 August 1914, the German Eighth Army High Command learned

with dismay that the Russian Second Army was about to invade in the south. A decision to retreat, taken in panic, was reversed when it was realized that the First

Army was stationary. Leaving a thin screen of troops, 1, to watch the enemy in the north, the Germans rapidly redeployed the bulk of their forces to join XX

Corps, already in the south facing the new Russian threat. The 1st Corps and the 3rd Reserve Division were moved by rail, 2, to form the southern flank of the new

position around Tannenberg, while XVII Corps and the 1st Reserve Corps, 3, marched to take station on the northern flank in the Bischofsburg area. By

26 August, the Germans had baited a trap for the unprepared and unsuspecting Russians.

Schlieffen Plan intended. The battle at Gumbinnen was inconclusive, however. The Germans broke off the engagement and withdrew westward. Inexplicably, *Rennenkampf* did not pursue them.

When Samsonov learnt about Gumbinnen, he assumed that German opposition in East Prussia had been broken and sought to overrun the province. Although his troops suffered greater supply problems than those of the First Army, he crossed over the frontier on 21 August.

Samsonov's advance south of the Masurian lakes astonished Prittwitz. Faced with an undefeated enemy to his front and a fresh army moving up on his right rear, he lost his nerve and ordered the Eighth Army to retire behind the River Vistula, some 320 km (200 mls) to the west. This order, greeted with dismay by his staff, had far-reaching effects, not only in East Prussia but on future operations in France.

No one was more disturbed than Lieutenant-Colonel Max Hoffman, Germany's leading authority on the Russian military machine, who was serving as a senior staff officer at Eighth Army Headquarters. He knew, from uncoded signals (corroborated by orders found on the body of a Russian officer), that *Rennenkampf's* forces were unable to move quickly; he knew, too, that although Samsonov had adopted an apparently threatening posture, his army was short of rations and equipment and, completely out of touch with the First Army, was, therefore, vulnerable to counter-attack.

Hoffman proposed to Count von Waldersee, the Chief of Staff, that some of the forces tied down in the north, watching the immobile *Rennenkampf*, should be rushed south to attack Samsonov's exposed left flank. Prittwitz saw the wisdom of the plan and cancelled his order for a general withdrawal. It was too late to save his career, however. The General had telephoned the German High Command at Coblenz to inform them of his intention to retreat behind the Vistula, but he omitted to tell them that he had changed his mind. The thought of losing East Prussia to the Russians, after token resistance only, aggrieved the Chief of the General Staff, Colonel-General Helmuth von Moltke. Suspicious of Prittwitz, he immediately ordered his dismissal and that of his blameless Chief of Staff, Waldersee. He replaced them with two soldiers who were to rise rapidly to dominate the German army throughout the rest of the First World War—General Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff.

Hindenburg, aged 67, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, was recalled from retirement to head the Eighth



Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934) had extensive military experience, having fought in the Austro-Prussian War in 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1). Although he ultimately led the German army to defeat, his reputation was greatly enhanced by the First World War and, in 1925, he was elected President. In 1933, when his faculties were in decline, he submitted to intense pressure and appointed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor.



General Erich Ludendorff (1865–1937), Hindenburg's Chief of Staff, was largely responsible for the German victory at Tannenberg. In 1916, when Hindenburg became supreme military commander, Ludendorff's influence greatly increased, and he intervened in civilian as well as military affairs. After the war, he advocated the new view of Aryan superiority and supported Adolf Hitler in his abortive *putsch* in 1920. He became a National Socialist member of the Reichstag in 1924, but later quarrelled with Hitler.

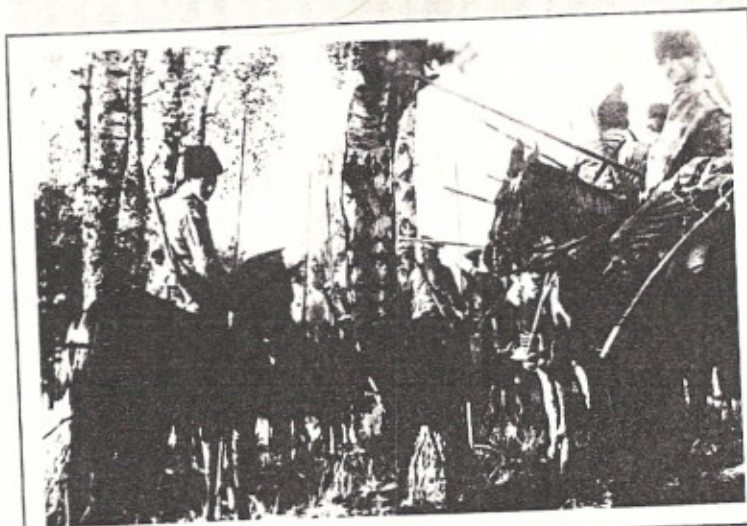


General Aleksandr Vasilyevich Samsonov (1859–1914) had served in the war of 1877 against Turkey and, by the age of 43, was a major-general. He commanded a cavalry division in the Russo-Japanese War and in 1909 was appointed Governor of Turkestan. Samsonov was generally liked by both his men and fellow officers, but his military talents were in decline by the time of Tannenberg, and at the close of the battle, appalled by the catastrophe, he committed suicide.



General Pavel Rennenkampf (1845–1918) was renowned in the Russian army for his dash and energy. However, he had quarrelled with Samsonov, indeed they had come to blows on the railway platform at Mukden, and they were barely on speaking terms. Thus their partnership, unlike that of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, was suspicious and uncooperative. Rennenkampf lost his nerve in 1915 and deserted his army. He was disgraced and dismissed by the service. Three years later, he was murdered by the Bolsheviks.

A group of Russian officers, photographed in 1914 with the owner of the estate on which they were billeted.



Cossacks, or light cavalry, were the élite of the Russian army and, in general, were well equipped. The great body of the army, however, was in all respects save number, inferior to the Germans, who had 10 pieces of

heavy artillery to every Russian piece, a more efficient transport system and infinitely superior telephone, telegraph and wireless equipment.



Some 75 per cent of N.C.Os in the Russian army were conscripts and, among other ranks, 50 per cent, at a conservative estimate, were illiterate. Moreover, unlike the homogeneous German units, one-third of the Russian army was composed of subject races, including Balts, Letts and Poles.

Tannenberg/3

Army. Ludendorff, then 49, a brilliant officer who had already distinguished himself in the advance through Belgium, was appointed his Chief of Staff.

Ludendorff learned of his appointment early on 22 August and immediately left the Western Front. He was driven to General Headquarters, where he was granted an audience with the Kaiser. Then, after a briefing meeting with Moltke, he boarded a special train to take him east. The train stopped at Hanover to pick up Hindenburg; it was the first time the two men had met.

On arrival at the Eastern Front, the new command team quickly accepted Hoffman's proposal, which was broadly in accordance with their own assessment of the situation. Satisfied that Rennenkampf would remain idle for some time, and alert to the fact that Samsonov's advance had produced a gap between his right flank and the Masurian lakes, Ludendorff saw an opportunity to encircle the Second Army. With Hindenburg's approval, he stripped the Eighth Army's left wing in order to bring sufficient numbers to bear against Samsonov, who was pressing forward in the belief that the Germans were retreating.

On 24 August, Ludendorff began the dangerous task of withdrawing two army corps in the face of Rennenkampf's forces, which were at last beginning to move. Large numbers were despatched south by train; the remainder were marched from the area down hot, dusty roads. Only two cavalry brigades remained, and for the next six crucial days they covered what Ludendorff described as 'a threatening thundercloud to the northeast.' The Germans planned to launch heavy attacks on Samsonov's flanks on the 26th, in order to force them back and so leave the three corps in his centre susceptible to double envelopment. Some of Samsonov's more perspicacious officers sensed a trap and advised against pushing too far ahead, into what seemed like a soft centre. When the General proposed to Army Group Headquarters that he should slow up the advance for that reason, Jilinsky accused him of cowardice and insisted that he press on with his 'pursuit'.

Although they were tired and ill fed, the Russian infantry fought valiantly against the German onslaught, which gathered in intensity as August drew to a close. Samsonov, whose communications had never been good, had little control over his regiments in the later stages of the battle. Despite a few local successes, which gave Ludendorff some anxious moments, Samsonov allowed his centre to drift northwest into a pocket of broken country, which the Eighth Army was poised to seal off.



- 1 Surrender of 13th Corps' main body
- 2 Surrender of 13th Corps' remnants
- 3 Surrender of 15th and 23rd Corps' remnants
- 4 Surrender of 13th Corps' advance guard
- 5 Death of Samsonov

— Russian troops
- - German troops

General Samsonov's Russian Second Army was in its death throes between 29 and 30 August. German forces had the enemy in a pincer grip, trapped in a wild, heavily forested area, covering some 520 sq km (200 sq mls). Every exit was covered, and the

Russians—hungry and exhausted—began to surrender to the Germans in droves.



Many thousands of Russians were taken prisoner of war in the days following the battle.

Defeated Russians emerged from dark woods into bright sunlight to surrender to the waiting Germans. Scenes like this, at Muschaken, were repeated many times throughout 30 August.

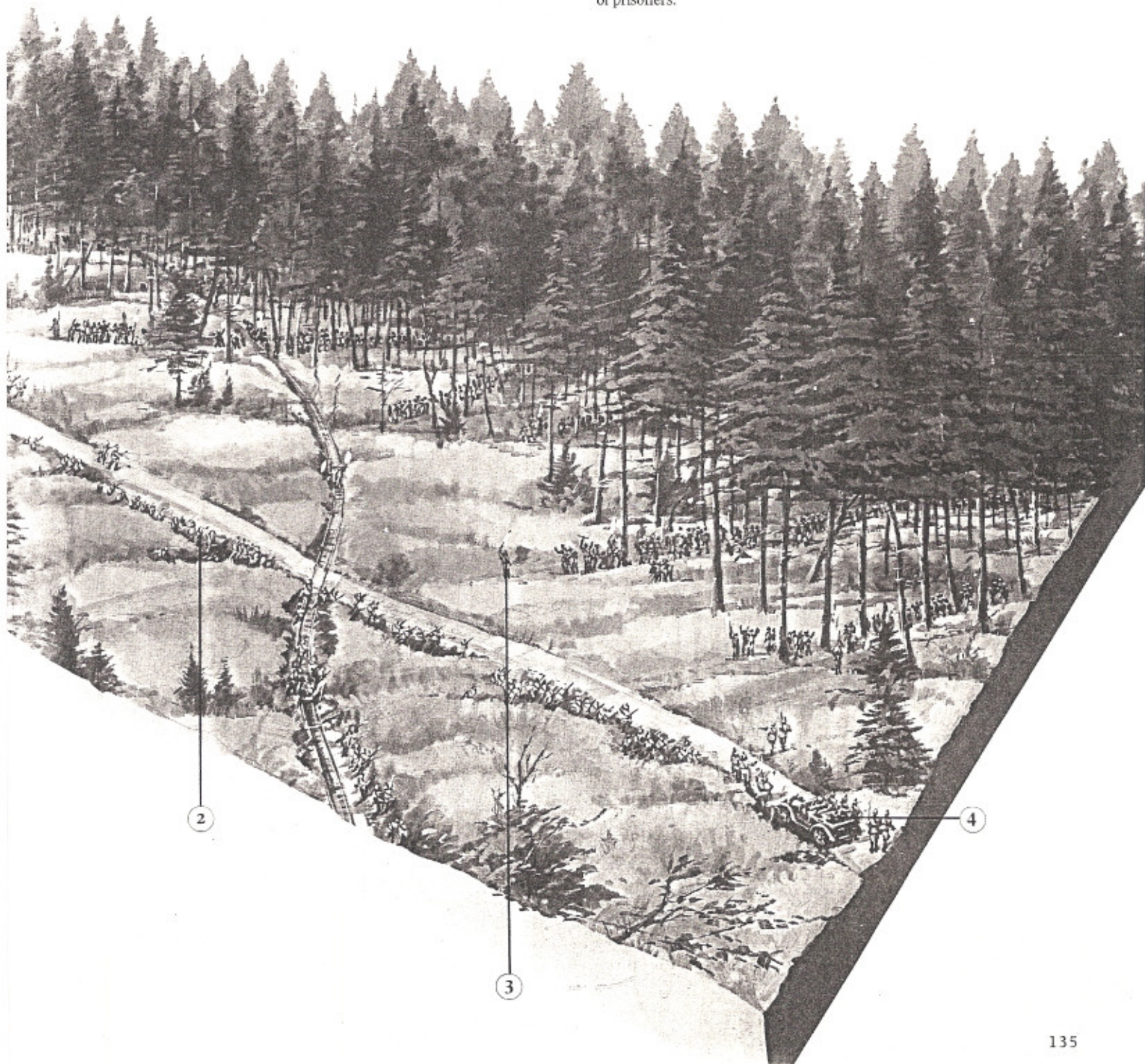
On this stretch of the Neidenberg to Willenberg road near Muschaken, 1, two battalions of German infantry, 2, guarded every path out of the forest.

Waving anything white that they could find, column after column of battle-weary Russian soldiers, 3, capitulated.

The Russian Army, which had been beset by supply problems, was starving when it surrendered. Most men had not eaten for several days. Their hardship was not over, however. It took the Germans until 3 September to organize rations for such a huge number of prisoners.

Sporadic rifle and machine-gun fire greeted the first Russians seen coming through the trees, but little resistance was offered to the German troops.

Members of the German staff, 4, arrived to receive formally the Russian surrender on this sector of the battlefield.



Tannenberg/4

On 28 August, the Germans were ready to spring their trap. The Russian flanking corps had been separated from Samsonov's main body, and, while a strong assault was launched on the centre, elements of the Eighth Army moved around toward Pasenheim in the north and Neidenberg in the south to meet in the rear of the enemy.

Deserted by both Jilinsky and Rennenkampf, who failed to answer urgent appeals for help, the exhausted Second Army was in no state to break out; its only recourse was surrender. Samsonov, unable to bear the disgrace of losing his command, walked

into the forest on 29 August, drew his revolver and shot himself dead.

Hindenburg called 30 August 'the day of harvesting' because thousands of Russians threw down their weapons and were rounded up into captivity. In his report to the Kaiser, he estimated that 60,000 prisoners had been taken, adding that the survivors of the flanking corps were retreating in 'hot haste'. In the event, the tally was much higher—90,000 prisoners, 30,000 casualties and 500 guns. The Eighth Army lost 10,000 to 15,000 men.

This great victory elevated Hindenburg

and Ludendorff into military idols overnight. The formidable partnership dominated the war in the east for a further two years; then they were transferred to France. Never again, however, were they to repeat the great success of the Battle of Tannenberg, which was so named by Ludendorff more for historical than military reasons, for the village had not played a particularly important part in the fighting. It was at Tannenberg, however, that Teutonic knights had been defeated by Poles and Lithuanians in 1410 and Ludendorff made this gesture to level the score.



German troops on the march, above. Their discipline and cohesion were in stark contrast to the chaos prevailing in most Russian units, right.





Captured Russian infantry, with their machine-guns, being marched into captivity, left. After the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Germany and Russia, following the Bolshevik Revolution, these and thousands more prisoners were repatriated to Russia. Because the Bolsheviks feared the presence of so many trained soldiers, however, many were summarily shot for alleged cowardice in surrendering at Tannenberg.



Russian cavalry on the move.

The stalemate on the Western Front in France, following the withdrawal of some German forces after the Battle of the Marne and the inconclusive Battles of the Aisne and First Ypres, posed a serious dilemma for Germany. The ambitious strategy of the Schlieffen Plan had failed in the area in which it had been deemed most likely to succeed. Yet at Tannenberg, in East Prussia, a striking, though not strategically decisive, victory had been won in the very theatre that Schlieffen had regarded as being of only secondary importance. The gross incompetence of the Russian commanders and the deficiencies of the Russian military machine convinced General Ludendorff that victory could be quickly achieved in the east, despite the enemy's massive resources of manpower. He planned to win in a war of manoeuvre, as opposed to the siege conditions of the Western Front. Considerable pressure was exerted on the Kaiser to support a major shift of men and *matériel* to the Eastern Front to knock Russia out of the war, while Germany stood on the defensive in the west—a complete reversal of the Schlieffen Plan. The move was resisted, however, by the Chief of the German General Staff. A compromise was eventually reached: offensives would be launched on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, but those in France would be of a limited nature. In consequence, Germany had enough strength in the east to occupy Poland and, with her Austro-Hungarian ally, advance deep into Russia, but not enough to achieve complete military victory. Hostilities on the Eastern Front drew to a close only when Russia plunged into revolution, in 1917, and the Bolshevik government then at once sued for peace.